

Pearls in the Sand

By Voronica Whitney-Robinson; Illustration by Dave Dorman

"I've found them," slurred the tipsy Mon Calamarian to his companions.

"What are you talking about, Ackli?" one of his Zabrak friends murmured while sipping at his almost-empty tankard.

"I saw them," he hissed, leaning so far across the filthy little table that he looked as though he was sleeping on it. "I found krayts."

At the mention of the fabled dragons, supposedly four to five times larger than the oldest of banthas, the few patrons of the tiny tavern in the remote outpost grew silent. Most dismissed the Mon Calamarian's claims, saying he was drunk or had heat stroke -- or both. But a few pricked up their ears, including two robed figures near the back of the cantina. As soon as she heard the word "krayt," Dusque Mistflieger pulled back her desert robe, revealing a full head of long, sandy-brown hair. She narrowed her gray eyes and strained to hear the Mon Calamarian better. The human was intrigued.

"I saw them," he said, talking more to his tankard now than to anyone else in the cramped cantina, sensing even in his drunken state that no one believed him. Most of the other patrons had gone back to discussing other topics, from the latest moisture vaporator model to the increase of Tusken Raiders east of the tiny outpost of Mos Taike. The topic of dragons was not a new one; the inhabitants of Mos Taike and indeed a good portion of Tatooine had heard of their existence. Not many spoke of seeing the creatures, however, because not many survived such an encounter.

"And I saw where they go to die," Ackli said so quietly that the declaration was nearly lost beneath the mournful whine of the lone slitherhorn player, who continued to play whether or not anyone watched him. As before, several heard Ackli's claim and wondered at the implications.

One of the Zabraks in Ackli's company, his face covered with a variety of tattoos, propped up the Mon Calamarian, none too gently. He demanded, "Could you find the place again?"

Ackli brushed the Zabrak's hands away as though he found them offensive. "'Course I could. I could do it with my eyes closed." As if to prove the point, he closed his eyelids and opened them again.

"If he's telling the truth..." the Zabrak said to the other Zabrak sitting at the small table with the Mon Calamarian.

"... then there might be bones or nests," the other finished for him, "and we both know what that might mean."

Even from her booth, Dusque could hear the absolute greed in the two Zabraks' voices. She turned to her companion, who was lowering his own hood.

"Did you hear that, Tendau?"

As soon as his domed head was visible, the Ithorian regarded Dusque with a look she knew well: one of caution mixed with reproach and resignation.

"I suspect I do, child," he replied slowly, his voice echoing oddly from his twin mouths.

The young woman leaned closer to Tendau's tall frame and whispered, "If they do know where the krayt graveyard is, imagine what that might mean!" She no longer bothered to disguise the growing excitement in her voice.

"Oh, I am imagining what it might mean, make no mistake," the Ithorian said. "Being consumed by krayts, running from greedy treasure hunters..."

"It will be fine." She laid a delicate hand against his long fingers. "This is a real opportunity. Can you picture how impressed Willel will be when we return with genetic samples of canyon krayts? And, just maybe, we'll find that precious item everyone who has ever followed these animals hopes to discover."

Tendau smiled at her genuine eagerness, and Dusque knew she had just about won him over. "We've got enough samples and tissues from feral banthas and bocatts to more than satisfy Willel's request," she said. "It wasn't as if it was the most challenging of missions anyway. Just sandy." She tried unsuccessfully to comb her fingers through her caked hair for emphasis.

"And we won't have another chance to go out again for weeks," she added. "I think the next thing on the agenda is a trip to Naboo for some sort of creature-handler event. You and I both know how boring that will be, watching a bunch of novices who think they understand the nuances of animal behavior strut around with their beasts."

"Not the most glorious of assignments, I agree," Tendau said. "But this--"

--is a once in a lifetime opportunity," said Dusque.

"And if the Mon Calamarian is mistaken?"

"Then we'll have added only half a day or so to our trip, and no harm done." She flashed a big grin as she heard the Ithorian sigh. Dusque knew she had persuaded him.

"All right," he said, "but I hope we will not regret this."

"We won't," she assured him. "I'm certain of it."

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Dusque and Tendau followed the two Zabrats and the now-sober Mon Calamarian for several hours. As soon as they had left behind the few tiny buildings that comprised the isolated post of Mos Taike -- a place so small there wasn't even a shuttleport -- there was little else except sand and wide open space to distract them.

Although Tendau was bulky and had some difficulty maneuvering over the dunes, he kept pace with the smaller, lighter Dusque. Even though their light-colored cloaks and environmental suits offered protection from the suns as well as camouflage on the sand, Dusque could feel a small trickle of sweat roll down between her shoulder blades. If she was already beginning to feel uncomfortable, she could only guess at what the Ithorian was suffering, with his larger frame and somewhat delicate feet. In all their years of service to the Empire as bioengineers, however, Dusque had never once heard him complain of hardship. Tendau's love of all the creatures throughout the galaxy had driven him from his herd ship to service in the Empire, where he could unravel the secrets of nature down to the genetic level. Dusque knew he was willing to sacrifice much for that prize.

And for some reason Tendau had taken a liking to Dusque, the only woman in the elite circle of bioengineers. Her other colleagues tended to regard her with disdain, and she always felt as though she had to prove something to them. She felt as though she were perpetually the new recruit to their ranks and could never hope to bridge the gap between their experience and her own expertise, no matter how hard she tried. The other bioengineers made Dusque feel that she could not rise to their lofty level -- not ever.

It was different with the Ithorian. Perhaps it was simply because they were both strangers on a strange world that they had forged a friendship in the sterile environment of their profession. Or maybe was because they both were genuinely fascinated by nature and what made things tick that they had bonded. For whatever reason, they had become a good team and were fortunate enough -- or were both disliked enough -- that they were assigned to missions together on a regular basis.

The missions they received were not the best. Typically they found themselves collecting mundane genetic samples of less-than-unusual creatures in some of the most backwater locations in the galaxy. Dusque always listened to those around her, however, and she had more than once stumbled across tales of a creature of unusual size or rarity because of her careful observation. She always managed to convince Tendau to come along with her, and she found that the prizes she discovered were enough to mollify those in charge enough that they overlooked her transgressions. She preferred to ask for forgiveness rather than for permission when on assignment.

The twin suns of Tatooine beat down mercilessly upon the golden sands. Everywhere she turned, Dusque saw only gold and blue in endless expanses. She lowered her hood and wiped the sweat from under her long hair. She turned toward Tendau and saw that he had followed her cue and removed his hood as well.

"How are you doing?" she asked.

"I'm--" Before he could get out another word, he was interrupted by the whine of laser fire.

"That sounded like it came from over that dune," Dusque said. She pointed toward the last direction in which they had seen the trio of looters heading. She ran toward the blasts. "C'mon."

As they headed cautiously up the dune, Dusque saw a woolly beast with large, curved horns swing its head up from the other side of the crest.

"Banthas," Dusque whispered as she slowed her pace, "and Wasters."

"It can only be Tusken Raiders," Tendau said, drawing up alongside her.

"Sand People," she hissed. Dusque was well aware of the Sand People's ferocity and penchant for cruelty.

They dropped to the ground and crawled along the hot sand the rest of the way up to the ridge. From their position, they could see a group of three Tusken Raiders with five tethered banthas near an impromptu camp. Two of the three Tusken Raiders had drawn their rifles and were firing on the three fortune hunters from Mos Taike.

"Those greedy idiots stumbled right into them," Dusque said. "And they don't seem to be faring very well," Tendau observed. Dusque looked around and saw little that could help the situation. She had only a simple Twi'lek dagger, and she knew that Tendau had only a survival knife. Neither of them carried any other type of weapon -- certainly nothing that would match a Tusken rifle or gaffi stick. She would have to think of something else. Scanning the scene, she saw only one thing that might work.

"Tendau," she said quietly, "slip down along the south side, and I'll go down the north side. We've got to cut those banthas loose and get them running."

The Ithorian smiled at her plan. "It is about all we can do," he whispered back. "I hope it works."

"So do I."

With that, she started sliding down one side of the ridge as Tendau slid down the other, putting them at opposite sides of the small herd of banthas. Dusque began to cut away at their tethers, hoping that the Sand People would be too distracted by their immediate prey to turn back and check on their mounts. Fortunately, she and Tendau managed to cut every tether undiscovered. She nodded to the Ithorian, and the two of them proceeded to jostle the herd's matriarch until she started to move. Just as Dusque suspected, the rest of the herd followed her lead, and soon every bantha had broken into a run, and Dusque and Tendau barely made it up over the ridge before one of the three Tusken Raiders noticed that their mounts had fled.

Dusque was counting on the fact that the Tusken Raiders were greedy but mercenary. The three opportunists from Mos Taike couldn't have amounted to more than sport to the desert dwellers and were of little monetary value to them, but their mounts would be too precious to lose. As it turned out, Dusque was right.

When the first of the Sand People noticed that their banthas had broken free, he yelled to his companions in their strange tongue. It was only a matter of seconds before the others gave up their attack on the Zabrats and Mon Calamarian and scrambled to their feet. The three fortune hunters wasted no time in fleeing from their pinned-down position and heading east. They surely wanted what might exist in the graveyard as much as Dusque did, and didn't seem to wonder why their fate had suddenly changed -- they simply took advantage of it. Looking south, Dusque could see the three Sand People diminished against the horizon as they trailed after their mounts. She and Tendau had remained undetected by both parties.

"Let's keep going," she told the Ithorian, and they continued trailing the former cantina patrons.

For the next thousand meters or so, little happened. Dusque and Tendau kept a discreet distance from the trio, remaining mindful that other Raiders might be lurking between the shifting dunes. They grew more and more tired as they trudged farther into the desolate desert, but they could not stop to rest because their quarry did not. Even though there was only the slightest breeze, it was enough to cover the trio's erratic tracks in only a few moments. Dusque was concerned they would lose their trail if she and Tendau slowed their pace, so they pushed on. Dusque hoped they were nearing the location the Mon Calamarian had spoken of back in Mos Taike, but her mind started to churn over what they were going to do with their competitors once they got there. It turned out not to be much of an issue.

As they climbed up another steep incline, Dusque turned back to check on Tendau. She could see that he had tired tremendously but wouldn't say a word to indicate it. She couldn't let her zeal for the potential prize wear him down any further.

"Why don't we stop for a while?" she said, surprising herself with her own raspy voice.

"I was thinking the exact same thing, little lady," Dusque heard from behind her. She whirled around to see the trio lined up on the other side of the dune where she and Tendau were standing. The two Zabrats had small

holdout blasters drawn. The Mon Calamarian stood slightly behind them with an almost ashamed look on his face, as though he couldn't believe the manners of the company he was keeping.

The one who had spoken motioned to Dusque and Tendau with his blasters. They were in no position to argue, so they climbed down the slope to stand in front of the armed Zabrats.

"And just who might you be?" the second one demanded. "Chasing after our treasure?" The first Zabrak shot him a look, and Dusque thought he must have been afraid that his companion had already revealed too much.

"Look," Dusque started to explain, raising her slim, white hands in the air in a gesture of someone trying to fend off an argument, "we're not trying to steal anything you think is yours. My colleague and I are Imperial bioengineers under Emperor Palpatine, and we --"

"Bloody scientists!" The first Zabrak spat and raised his blaster. Dusque realized she might have just sealed their fate, as there were many who hated the Emperor and his servants, especially this far from the Core Worlds.

"Wait," the other Zabrak said. "I'm not prepared to shed blood over these pearls, and I'm definitely not prepared to have the Empire breathing down my neck any more than it already is. I've got a better idea."

"What do you have in mind?" the first asked, and Dusque could hear that the anger in his voice had been replaced by the emotion felt by many who believed themselves to be on the wrong side of the Empire: fear.

"Let's let the desert claim them," the second said. "By the time anyone finds them, they'll be mostly bones. I'm sure, given their line of work, it wouldn't be the first time one of them met with a fatal accident."

"That's a good point," the Mon Calamarian chimed in. He seemed eager to avoid bloodshed as well.

The first Zabrak, who had been so eager to blast them, took their knives and waved them to sit down. "One of those knives is mine," the second Zabrak said.

As Dusque and Tendau followed the Zabrak's orders, the wind picked up, and although there was still at least half an hour before the second sun of Tatooine set, darkness fell quickly.

"Sandstorm coming," the Mon Calamarian shouted to be heard over the growing howl of the wind. "Just leave them. The sand beetles will take care of them."

The second Zabrak had yanked Dusque's arms behind her back and was lashing them together when visibility dropped to nearly nothing. "Good enough," he shouted to his twin, and the trio took off still maintaining an easterly direction as best as Dusque could tell.

As soon as they were out of sight, Dusque shouted, "Are you all right?"

The Ithorian managed a rueful smile. "You do manage to get us into the most interesting predicaments," he yelled back. Dusque rose to her feet and stumbled in the darkness, kicking at the ground. With the reduced visibility, it took a few moments before she felt the thud she was hoping for. She dropped to her knees and groped until she found the jagged rock she had kicked. Dusque began to saw her bindings against the stone.

"I'll be right there," she shouted. She realized that, in the midst of the swirling sand that bit her face, she had no idea where Tendau was. She was momentarily confused. It took only a little effort to cut through the leather thong that the Zabrak had used to bind her. Now she had the daunting task of finding Tendau.

"Tendau!" she shouted above the howl. She turned about wildly and tried to remember which direction she had taken when she had begun searching for the rock. She tried to slow her breathing and calm her heart, realizing that she was verging on panic.

As she decided which direction to take, she noticed the sandstorm was weakening. She remembered, now that she had regained some composure, that these storms never seemed to last long on Tatooine. Like many of its indigenous animals, Tatooine's sandstorms were quick -- and often deadly.

As she wandered through the boneyard, Dusque marveled at how many of the creatures had passed away, each one inexplicably drawn to the same spot.

"Tendau!" she called again when she thought she saw his bent form ten meters away. Even as she raced back to him, she was amazed at how far she had actually walked. She shook her head at the power of disorientation that the short storm had wrought.

As she dropped to his side, Dusque noticed with concern that Tendau was hunched over. Then she realized he had assumed that position to hide the domed head perched atop his long, curving neck.

"Are you okay?" she asked as she untied his hands.

"As usual," he finally answered, "I believe I am as all right as you are." The sandstorm had nearly abated, and Dusque could see his gentle smile.

She smiled in return, but her expression faded to a wince when she saw his bloody wrists. Obviously, he had been struggling against his bonds the entire time she had been looking for a way to free herself and she realized that nothing was worth the pain of seeing her friend injured.

As she helped him to his feet, Dusque said, "it won't take us too long to return to Mos Taike now that we aren't trailing them any longer. C'mon." She moved to turn back, but the Ithorian remained steadfast.

"It would be incredibly wasteful to retrace our steps when we are so near to our goal," he said.

"You want to go on?" she asked, incredulous.

"Don't you?"

"Yes... I do."

"Then let's continue," he said, taking the lead. "I don't think they could've gone too far with the storm."

Dusque shook her head and smiled, partly at her companion's resiliency and partly at his loyalty. He knew how this quest had caught her attention and how she hated to leave anything unfinished. And he was willing to see it through to the end. She was touched by the prize she already possessed: his friendship. As they tracked the mercenary trio as best they could, one thing nagged at Dusque. She mulled it over and over, and then she finally mentioned it to Tendau.

"You know what seemed strange?" she said. "The fact that he called what we are searching for 'pearls.' Didn't that seem a bit odd? I mean, I guess they do resemble pearls somewhat, but why would he have chosen that --"

"Look," Tendau interrupted and pointed to something at the eastern end of the rift they were standing atop. Glinting in the starlight was what looked like a series of white arches, perfectly shaped and perfectly spaced apart. Even from a few hundred meters away, Dusque realized what they were.

"Krayt bones," she breathed. She grinned at Tendau and was ready to run down the hill. But before she could take a step, the now-familiar whine of lasers cut through the night. There were multiple blasts, and they were growing louder. Dusque and Tendau, seeing only scrub and brush around them, dropped to the cooling sand for cover. A moment later, the Zabraks and the Mon Calamarian appeared at the eastern end of the rift, running in the opposite direction. Every once in a while, one of the Zabraks turned and fired behind them, but for the most part they simply ran as fast as their legs would carry them. They were nearly out of sight, and Dusque was beginning to question their sanity when a cry ripped through the night.

Coming out of the darkness from the eastern end of the rift were not one but three krayt dragons. Dusque held her breath in awe. She had studied the information on the creatures -- or what little information existed on them -- but she had never dreamed she would be so close to one, let alone three. The first two were much larger, so she guessed the third



was a juvenile. All three had the distinctive crown of five horns, and their bodies were greenish. Even from where they lay, Dusque could see the large spines protruding from every part of their armored skin, and the twin spikes at the end of their tails.

As best as she could estimate, the smaller krayt must have been as tall as two average humanoids at the haunches, while the older dragons were at least twice as big as that. It was supposed that the animals continued to grow until death. If that were truly the case, Dusque wondered how old the specimens in front of them might be.

Just as quickly as the dragons had appeared, they disappeared in the opposite direction, still in pursuit of the three intruders.

"It looks like our 'associates' have drawn the animals out for us," Tendau said quietly, although there was no need for whispers.

"Let's not waste the chance," Dusque replied, starting to run down the hill where the krayts had appeared, the Ithorian directly behind her.

As they entered the rift, Dusque could hardly breathe. There were not just one or two skeletons, but hundreds upon hundreds. As she wandered through the boneyard, easily passing through the partial ribcages as though they were tunnels, Dusque marveled at how many of the creatures had passed away, each one inexplicably drawn to the same spot. The place reminded her of some of the other creatures she had encountered in her work, animals that always returned to the same place to spawn. Some of those creatures were known as "terminal spawners," because they died soon after reaching their destination. Dusque hoped that was the explanation in this case.

As Dusque and Tendau moved deeper into the rift, passing skulls and the remains of claws, something winked reflected starlight from the sandy ground. Dusque moved toward it as her colleague reminded her, "We best collect what samples we can. I don't think we have much time." Nestled in the center of one of the many ribcages was an object nearly the size of Dusque's head. She hefted the thing up and held it out for a better look. Its surface was a creamy color, and the object glowed softly. It was perfectly smooth, and Dusque realized that the krayts, like many reptilian species, must swallow stones and churn them around in their gizzards to aid digestion -- perhaps for years.

"Pearls," she said, and although the boneyard was an odd place for it, she burst into laughter. "Pearls," she said again, almost breathless.

"Dusque," Tendau said. The tone of his voice caused Dusque to whip her head around.

She gasped and let the krayt pearl fall to her feet.

"Ohhh," she said in awe.

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In the tavern, a few of the newly arrived travelers from Mos Espa sat around the bar. After a few Tatooine Sunburns, the talk turned to the fabled canyon krayts and their treasures.

"I heard that the graveyard is littered with their pearls, each one worth a fortune," said a young Rodian to his female companion. "I'll find one for you," he told her before stealing a kiss. She giggled delightedly.

"Don't be stupid," a human snapped at him. "Not only is there no graveyard, there's no such thing as a krayt or a pearl. All that you'll find out there are some giant sand beetles that will be more than happy to make a meal out of you." He and his companions shared a hearty laugh.

"He's right," came a strong female voice from the back of the room. In a dark corner of the tavern, a cloaked figure rose, left her hooded companion, and walked to the bar.

The woman pulled back her hood to reveal a head of light-brown hair full of sand and dust. Her gray eyes twinkled with delight. "There *is* such a thing as a krayt, and there are fortunes beyond belief out there, just waiting for discovery."

Not to be outdone by the young woman, the human who had discouraged the Rodian demanded, "And how do you know?"

"Because not only have I been there, I have brought back one of their treasures."

The room grew silent in anticipation. Dusque lifted a sack onto the bar and carefully opened it. Slowly, she withdrew a single, pearl object and held it with great reverence high in the air.

"Aww," the Rodian moaned. "That's no treasure, just a worthless egg." And the patrons returned to their drinks, disappointed.

But Dusque heard none of it. She stared at the gleaming krayt egg and sighed, "Priceless."